

**Stress, pressure, and anxiety: Binge Drinking at Saint Mary's University**

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### **Abstract**

University student stress levels are increasing as well as their negative coping strategies, such as binge drinking and drug experimentation. This research attempts to understand more about where the student stress is coming from. The research questions which this study attempts to answer are; (1) Are students engaging in binge drinking as a coping mechanism for academic pressures? (2) Are students engaging in binge drinking as a coping mechanism for social pressures? (3) Do academic and social pressures contribute to the onset of social anxiety? To answer these questions, a questionnaire was distributed among Saint Mary's University undergraduate students to better understand their academic and social pressures, in addition to the forming of social anxiety and binge drinking as a coping mechanism for their pressures. This study found that social pressures were far greater than academic pressures and resulted in increased binge drinking for students who felt social pressures. Furthermore, it was found that those who experienced social anxiety were more likely to engage in binge drinking as a coping mechanism for social pressures. This study provides avenues for future research and alcohol intervention or prevention programs.

*Keywords:* binge drinking, pressures, academic, social, anxiety, coping

## **Introduction**

For many students university may feel like a step forward into adulthood, but a step behind from adulthood responsibilities and commitments. Once a student enters university, they can often experience changes in the mode of peer interactions and expectations for social appearances. The increased association with peers and expectations for social performances on a regular basis may lead to social pressures and social anxieties and for many students, perhaps a combination of both. This paper will explore how academic and social pressures at Saint Mary's University may lead to social anxiety and binge drinking on campus. The review of literature will explore multiple aspects which contribute to the reasons for binge drinking, the combination of binge drinking and social anxiety, academic and social pressures, and the self-medication hypothesis as a coping mechanism for academic and social pressures. Each of these contributions to the literature review is important in understanding the university phenomenon of binge drinking on campus. Highlighting the reasons for and effects of binge drinking allow for the in-depth understanding of the harmful associations caused by binge drinking. As will be shown, binge drinking often stems from an underlying issue such as social anxiety, resulting from academic and social pressures. This literature review will display the ways in which university students use binge drinking as a self-medication hypothesis to cope with their daily stressors. Following the literature review, there is a methods and materials section to explain the procedures which were in place to conduct this research. Then, the results are displayed, following an in depth discussion section with limitations and avenues for future research. Finally, this thesis concludes with an overview of prevention and intervention measures as they are useful in

identifying healthy ways for students to cope with their academic or social stressors. For the purpose of this study, the following research questions were asked; (1) Are students engaging in binge drinking as a coping mechanism for academic pressures? (2) Are students engaging in binge drinking as a coping mechanism for social pressures? Finally, (3) Do academic and social pressures contribute to the onset of social anxiety?

### **Review of Literature**

The lifestyles of students are most often changed once they enter university. There are changes in academic work, social expectations, modes of communication, and lack of authoritative control. As there is little to no authoritative figures, such as parents, dictating a student's daily life, risky choices can often be made; one of which is binge drinking. Byrd (2016) explains that university provides an experience in a student's life which is typically free from parental controls and it provides an atmosphere which is more tolerant of alcohol experimentation. Furthermore, Burke & Stephens (1999) contend that the developmental age of many college and university students are often characterized by assertions of independence and experimentation with new adult-like behaviors or feelings of invulnerability that may promote drinking. The transformation into university seems to be a leeway into a less structured, more experimental environment which allows for students to make decisions for themselves; or with the help of their peers. Although there is less guidance for students, there is an increase in academic and social pressures, perhaps resulting in an increase in binge drinking as a coping mechanism for such pressures.

## **Binge Drinking**

According to the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (2014) binge drinking refers to when a male drinks five or more drinks, or a female drinks four or more drinks on a single occasion at least once per week during the past 12 months. The Centre for Mental Health and Addictions (2014) has found that when a student engages in binge drinking, they quickly become intoxicated. Although getting intoxicated may be the primary goal for some students, they may not realize that they are drinking faster than their body can eliminate the alcohol consumed. In fact, according to the Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse (2013), it takes more than one hour for someone's body to process a standard drink of alcohol; therefore the only way to become sober is to quit drinking and wait for the alcohol to pass. On campus, many university students may not know their limits for drinking as university campuses provide opportunities for first time alcohol consumption; thus their wait times are extended and there is an increase in health and social risks while heavily intoxicated.

Binge drinking has become a serious issue for many campuses globally. Boersnma, Butt, and Dell (2015) used findings from the 2012 National College Health Assessment to support their initiative in curbing binge drinking on university campuses. The National College Health assessment found that out of 34, 039 participants from Canadian universities there were 36 percent of students who indicated that they drank five or more drinks in one sitting at least once within the last 2 weeks. This assessment helps in outlining the prevalence of students who are engaging in high-risk binge drinking on a regular basis within Canadian universities. To support these findings, Boersnma et al (2015) display the high importance of creating and changing the awareness and

behaviours of university students, staff, and practices. Boersma et al. used these findings and their shared concerns for binge drinking on campus and incorporated them into a prevention program at the University of Saskatchewan titled *What's Your Cap: Know When to Put a Lid on Drinking (WYC)*. This program began and continued as a student-led initiative, which consistently found that binge drinking on campus was a common concern for the campus community. In a study conducted by Leontini et al (2015), their findings suggested that students engaged in binge drinking because it was socially expected, claims were made that there was not much else to do as a student besides drinking and socializing. In addition to these findings, Leontini and colleagues found that alcohol consumption, especially heavy consumption, was expected among university peers and it created or reinforced friendships and social networking. While their study primarily focuses on residential students in Australia, it is still evident that social pressures play a major role in a student's willingness to engage in binge drinking. As social interactions will be ever-present in a university setting, it cannot be misinterpreted that drinking pressures will always be present. In a study conducted by Zeimelis, Bucknam, and Elfessi (2002), it was found that alcohol prevention programs which focused on changing student environments through student participation and involvement in education processes on binge drinking effects decreased student's engagement with binge drinking. While certain aspects of prevention programs may not take effect, the aspects which were noted certainly made an impact on university student binge drinking cultures.

### **Risks and Reasons for Binge Drinking**

Binge drinking can have heavy negative implications for those who engage in such behaviour. Boersma et al (2015), highlight some of the associated risks with binge drinking using the 2012 National College Health Assessment. For instance, 40 percent of students reported that they did something they later regretted when drinking alcohol, 30 percent of those students forgot where they were or what they did, 20 percent physically injured themselves, and finally 20 percent had unprotected sex. Each of these instances can have negative effects on the health, social, and mental health of students.

Compounding this issue further, there are even worse situations that can stem from binge drinking. Byrd (2016) states that each year approximately 1,400 university students are killed and half a million are injured due to alcohol related accidents. Terlecki, Buckner, Larimer, and Copeland (2011) emphasize that heavy alcohol use in university students has been associated with high risk and illegal behaviors, such as physical or sexual assault, property damage, and personal injury. Thus, not all negative impacts from binge drinking are short term, many effects result in long term consequences as well. Terlecki et al (2011) note that for some students, heavy alcohol use during university symbolizes the initiation of a severe, chronic alcohol use pattern which may then lead to alcohol dependence or severe alcohol-related health problems.

Many of these risks are generally known among student populations, yet binge drinking still occurs, sometimes even after a student has experienced one or several of these negative impacts themselves. These actions beg the question why students still engage in this behaviour, knowing there are harmful effects? Although there could be multiple answers to this inquiry, Tavoracci (2016) found that university students,

especially female students, represent a stressed population who often hold unhealthy and risky behaviours regarding nutrition, alcohol and the Internet, including social media or dating websites. Another finding which Tavolacci (2016) showcases through their study is that there are associations between playing university sports and binge drinking. This association contends that binge drinking is increased within sports teams because of socializing expectations amongst teammates. This study further emphasizes the social pressures which university students face to engage in binge drinking with their peers on campus.

To highlight some of the negative risks and effects that occur with binge drinking, Wells, Graham, and Purcell (2009) conducted a study on pre-drinking, another name for binge drinking, prior to going out to a bar or social function. Wells and colleagues can conclude that there is an increase in the risk of blackouts or passing out, hangovers, and/or alcohol poisoning when engaging in binge drinking. Despite the associations of risk with heavy drinking, there are three motivations which the authors contend are for heavy drinking prior to going out to a social function, these motivations are: to avoid paying for high priced drinks at drinking establishments; to achieve drunkenness in order to enhance and extend the night out; and to socialize with friends, reduce social anxiety, or enhance male group bonding before going out. Additionally, young heterosexual university men are noted to have used pre-drinking as a way to engage in confidence building to prepare themselves for interactions with the opposite sex. Through Wells et al work, it would appear that much of the motivations for drinking heavily prior to attending a social function would be to alleviate social stress or social anxiety due to perceived or real social pressures.

Much of the literature on binge drinking does not include academic pressures as a reason for binge drinking; in fact it was difficult to locate literature which showcased that academic pressures were a reason to engage in binge drinking. Most often, binge drinking had negative effects on academic work; however it was not noted to be used as a coping mechanism for such pressures.

### **Social Anxiety and Binge Drinking**

The mental health issue which will be explored through this research is social anxiety. Social anxiety will be used as the primary factor in relation to binge drinking on university campuses because the mental health and stability of university students is integral to student success. If social anxiety can be linked to a reason for engaging in binge drinking, it is important to highlight the ways in which social anxiety can be alleviated in university students to decrease binge drinking, as binge drinking has proven to be a dangerous and risky action among university student populations.

Terlecki et al (2011) use the American Psychiatric Association's 1994 definition to describe social anxiety as "characterized by intense and/or persistent fear or avoidance of social scrutiny". Additionally, Terlecki and colleagues found that elevated social anxiety has been regularly linked to greater alcohol-related problems among university students. This linkage may be explained as Terlecki et al (2011, p. 8) note that "perceived peer alcohol use is the strongest predictor of alcohol consumption among [university] student populations." The authors continue to explain that individuals with elevated social anxiety may be vulnerable to drinking in response to perceived norms of alcohol use as well as their fear of scrutiny by alcohol-using peers. Within this study it becomes evident that social pressures to engage in binge drinking are often a source of social anxiety and in

turn are creating more social anxiety to fit in, regardless of the negative health or well-being associations.

Burke and Stephens (1999) highlight the aforementioned statement by arguing that the highly social nature of university campuses, which typically hold pressures to fit in are likely to result in students meeting, interacting, and socializing with new people on a regular basis; thus there is a desired goal of acceptance which may increase the motivations of students to socialize, however the unfamiliarity of people and a new environment may generate feelings of social anxiety. This statement is supported by the finding that 37 percent of university undergraduates report feeling anxiety when interacting with members of the opposite sex (Burke & Stephens, 1999).

Social anxiety is a large problem in its own sense aside from coping mechanisms which may be used for such anxiety. For instance, Russell and Topham (2012) noted that social anxiety is inextricably linked to self-doubt, low self-worth, and internal shame. Furthermore, the authors noted that these factors can exert a strong impact on one's identity, relationships, mental health, and success in higher education. As social anxiety is already a barrier to one's personal success, it is increasingly important to identify other stressors and pressures on a student's daily life which may influence their social anxiety in a negative manner.

According to Ham, Zamboanga, and Bacon (2011) social anxiety is a major risk factor for dangerous alcohol use. In the author's findings, they conclude that the association between social anxiety and dangerous drinking behaviour is dependent on one's beliefs about the effects of which alcohol can have on their situation. This finding is frightening as it contends that a student may engage in dangerous drinking if they believe

that alcohol will alleviate their symptoms of social anxiety. Furthermore, if a student's peers are pressuring them to engage in dangerous drinking due to their experiences with alcohol, the anxiety-ridden individual may engage in such behaviour if they believe their experience will be similar to their peers.

### **Academic and Social Pressures**

University can impose a wide array of new stressors in a student's life; especially academically and socially. These stressors can result in psychological distress for many students. According to Deasy, Coughlan, Pironom, Jourdan, and Mannix-McNamara (2014, p. 1) "[p]sychological distress among higher education students is of global concern." Psychological distress has become an important issue, mainly due to the ways in which students cope with distress. Many of these coping mechanisms have potential consequences for student's health and academic performances. Such distress can impact student engagement, diminish academic performances, and lower the rates of degree completion (Renner et al, 2015). The psychological distress of students is important from a health promotion or illness prevention perspective because of the links with risky behaviours and with physical illnesses in higher education students as well as its likelihood to produce more serious mental health disorders (Deasy et al., 2014). Renner et al (2015) produced findings which supported that students under the age of 25 are more likely to experience mental health or substance use disorders as 75 percent of these disorders emerge before 25 years of age. This finding suggests that students are at an incredible risk for poor mental health and poor coping strategies.

As mentioned previously, university holds a heightened experience of new socially environmental pressures; however it also expands to an increase in academic

pressures to perform well in areas such as maintaining a high grade point average or obtaining professional placements, such as co-op or post-graduate programs. In a study about university stress Bardone-Cone et al. 2012, found that academic stress turned out to be the only domain of stress which predicted difficulties for controlling excessive drinking in response to negative affect, a psychological term used to describe negative emotions and low self-worth. This finding was found to be particularly true for individuals with low tolerance for distress who are searching for methods to escape such stress. Additionally, Chen and Feeley (2015) found that alcohol is commonly used among individuals when they are attempting to temporarily escape from life problems, such as work-life balance or interpersonal conflicts, and provide evidence to contend that university students who endure high levels of stress tend to also drink heavily. Throughout Deasy and colleagues (2014) study, it was found that students did not want to accept vulnerability to stress and anxiety or to using coping mechanisms such as alcohol and other substance abuse to escape their feelings of stress and anxiety.

As university has proven to be a highly social and interactive space among students, Lorant and Nicaise (2015) found that students who spent a lot of time together in similar social groups possess similar drinking behaviour to one another; also their social position contributes to the explanation of their excessive alcohol consumption. Their findings support that structural position has effects on binge drinking. For instance, social groups who display higher social density, such as students involved with fraternities and sororities display a higher prevalence of engaging in binge drinking and high-risk behaviour related to excessive drinking, despite academic stance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework which will be used in understanding social anxiety and binge drinking on university campuses will be the self-medication hypothesis (SMH), first proposed by Dr. Khantzian from Harvard University, in the 1980's. The SMH can be used to understand and emphasize the methods that students use for coping with social anxiety from academic and social pressures. The SMH contends that individuals will turn to substance use in order to reduce or to manage negative or overwhelming emotional instances. By the 1990's the SMH has been used to explain a common model of addiction that states that people use substances to self-regulate, due to difficulties in self-esteem, negative emotions, interpersonal relationships, or self-care (Ruglass, 2014). The SMH has inspired studies which have found that substance use can actually worsen the psychological symptoms which individual are experiencing. After stopping the substance use after an extended period of heavy usage, withdrawal symptoms can occur copycatting the psychological symptoms which first occurred, such as anxiety. This may perpetuate a dangerous cycle where the individual continues to use additional substances to manage or regulate their symptoms (Ruglass, 2014).

For example, Strahan et al (2011) utilized the SMH to understand binge drinking as a coping mechanism for social anxiety. The authors highlight the fundamental tenets of the SMH which are; individuals with anxiety feel distress, the distress is relieved by the use of alcohol, and the resulting negative reinforcement leads to excessive use of the alcohol. This literature review is not attempting to contend that social anxiety is the only, or most obvious, reason for binge drinking however it would appear based upon

previously noted literature that social anxiety is very likely to occur if a student understands alcohol as an anxiety reducer or coping mechanism and does not know of any other ways to eliminate their feelings of anxiety.

### **Materials and Methods**

The purpose of this study was to look at the social and academic pressures which undergraduate students at Saint Mary's university face and to assess whether or not binge drinking was used as a coping mechanism for the resulting social anxiety. In order to explore this possible connection, I designed a questionnaire and framed it around the following question; how do academic and social pressures at Saint Mary's University lead to social anxiety and binge drinking on campus? The questionnaire consisted of 33 questions, which asked respondents about their academic pressures, social pressures, binge drinking, and social anxiety. Some of the questions used regarding binge drinking and social anxiety had been selected from The Student Alcohol Questionnaire (SAQ) and the Social Anxiety Scale (SAS). The questions were designed to help determine whether or not social and academic pressures influence social anxiety and binge drinking on the Saint Mary's University campus. The questionnaire was available from January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017 to February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017 online through Qualtrix. Participants were provided with the opportunity to submit their names after the completion of the questionnaire to enter a contest to win one of four \$50 cash prizes.

#### *Location*

The study took place at Saint Mary's University which is located at 923 Robie Street in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Saint Mary's University has a student population of 7447

students (Saint Mary's University, 2013). The university consists of both undergraduate and graduate students; however the survey was only available to students in their undergraduate degree. Survey access was only granted to undergraduate students because their perspectives would be greatly different from those of graduate students due to different academic pressures and workloads, social pressures, and ability to cope with such pressures. Saint Mary's University is located in Halifax, Nova Scotia which has a population of 390, 095.

### *Participants*

The current study collected a total of 139 questionnaires. The participants were undergraduate students actively enrolled at Saint Mary's University and between the ages of 17-25. Male, female, and alternate gender identifying participants were all encouraged to participate. The study did not provide restrictions on ethnicity and/or culture. Participants were recruited via poster (please see Appendix A) and through in-class presentations on the study. The posters were placed around campus by myself on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The posters provided students with basic information about the study and where and how to retrieve the questionnaire itself.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was designed and administered through Qualtrix. Qualtrix is a private research software company, created in 2002. Qualtrix enables users to access a multitude of ways to conduct online data collection and analysis. Quantitative analysis using Qualtrix is cited in a number of different professional and academic journals. Qualtrix software provides access to creating different styles of questionnaires and

response settings. It also allows for questionnaire distribution in a number of different ways, such as anonymous links, personal links, QR codes, social media, and offline apps. An online questionnaire was used to collect data, created and analyzed through Qualtrix. To analyze the data, a code book was designed (Please see appendix C). The ethical guidelines for this study were met and approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethic Board, approved as file number 17-10.7 on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

Using a questionnaire was the most applicable method to answer my research question for several reasons. First, this study was limited for time as it was conducted through two academic semesters of an undergraduate degree, resulting in approximately 8 months. Questionnaires are a good method to use as they allow for a high response rate in a short period of time, resulting in the ability to gather characteristics of the population at Saint Mary's University. Additionally, online questionnaires have little to no cost associated with them. My questionnaire was designed through the program, Qualtrix. Qualtrix which was easily accessible as a student as I was able to access it online for free as Saint Mary's University has a license. Furthermore, this method is the most appropriate to use to as it does not interfere physically with participants, this is good because it allows participants to remain anonymous when answering questions, which has the potential to result in the respondents providing more honest answers as they cannot be identified. These same characteristics allow this method to be very non-intrusive.

Although this method was most applicable to answer the purposed research question, there were limitations to this study. First, the response rate contributed to a low

sampling frame. The sampling frame used was undergraduate students in Saint Mary's University, who had access to the survey link. The survey link was provided through emails to six different Sociology or Criminology classes and provided on posters around the Saint Mary's University campus. The results of this study were produced using data from university students; thus the data can only be generalized to other university students. This is because university students endure different social and academic pressures or situations than non-students, such as exams, financial strains, or peer pressures to fit in. Additionally, the time limit acted as a limitation to this study because the results represent only one time period of the year, January and February. The time constriction also acted as a weakness of the study due to the fact that number of participants may have increased given more time for survey access. The survey was posted online for a total of 43 days. The results of this data have the potential to influence Saint Mary's policy makers, counsellors, and clinicians on the Saint Mary's University campus using the results as a tool to create or promote intervention and prevention strategies to curb binge drinking on campus.

## **Results**

Findings from the questionnaire on *Assessing the Link Between Academic, Social Pressures, and Binge Drinking Among University Students* will be represented through bar charts, percentages, and statistics. Data was analyzed and exported from Qualtrix, the online questionnaire administration software program used to collect the data. Demographics of the survey can be found in Table 1.0 (also see Appendix D).

**Appendix D- Table 1.0**

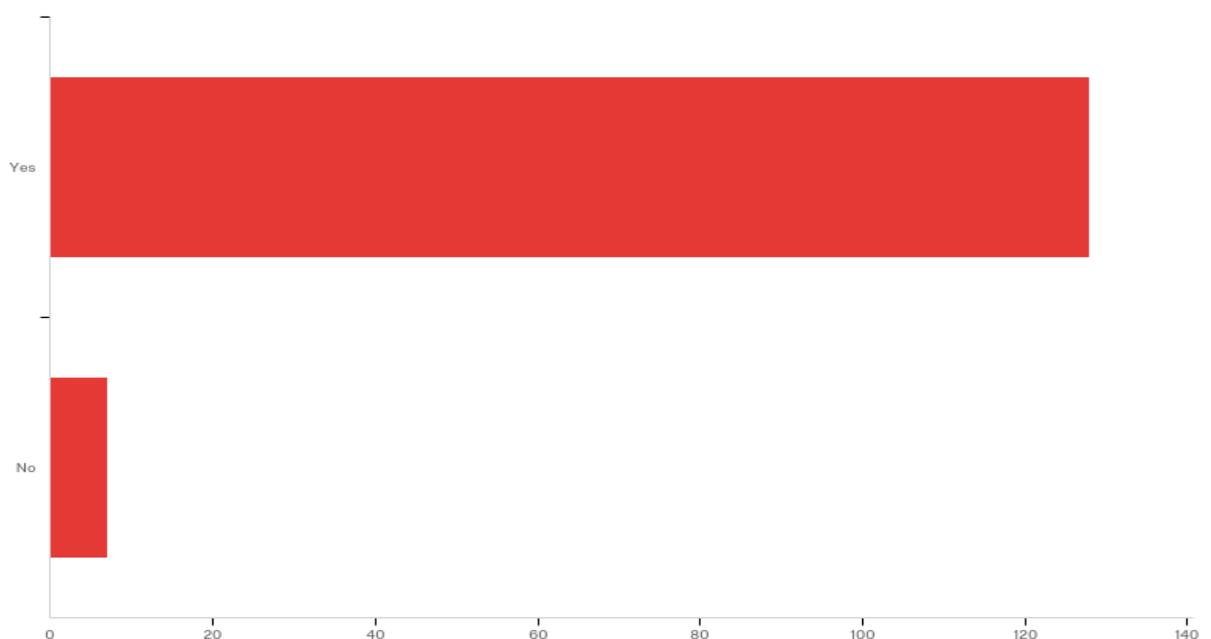
<b>Category</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>136 (100%)</b>
Male	42 (30.88%)
Female	90 (66.18)
Other	4 (2.94%)
<b>Total age range</b>	<b>136 (100%)</b>
18 or under	7 (5.15%)
19	12 (8.82%)
20	34 (25.00%)
21	44 (32.35%)
22	21 (15.44%)
23	5 (3.68%)
24	2 (1.47%)
25	2 (1.47%)
26+	9 (6.62)
<b>Total ethnicities</b>	<b>135 (99.26%)</b>
White	109 (80.74%)
Black	7 (5.19%)
Aboriginal	4 (2.96%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	3 (2.22%)
Latino/Hispanic	0 (0.00%)
Middle Eastern	5 (3.70%)
Other	7 (5.19%)
<b>Total Years Enrolled in University</b>	<b>135 (99.26%)</b>
First Year	13 (9.63%)
Second Year	21 (15.56%)
Third Year	55 (40.74%)
Fourth Year	35 (25.93%)
Fifth Year	11 (8.15%)
<b>Total Approximate GPA</b>	<b>135 (99.26%)</b>
1.0-2.0	3 (2.22%)
2.0-3.0	37 (27.41%)
3.0-4.0	73 (54.07%)
4.0-4.30	22 (16.30%)

In brief, the majority of people who participated in the online questionnaire were females who represented 66.18 percent of the total survey population. The most common age of participants was 21 at 32.35 percent, and most respondents were of a white ethnic background (80.74 %) of all participants.

Interestingly, the majority of participants were in third year university (40.74 %), while over half (54.07 %) had grade point averages among the 3.0-4.0 range. At Saint Mary's University, this represents anywhere between an A and a B mark. Although grade point averages are decently high, there was still cause for concern when identifying that 94.81 percent of students have consumed alcohol in their lifetime. Students who were 18 or under, 6 out of 7 had consumed alcohol in their life, resulting in 85.71 percent of students who are below the Nova Scotia legal drinking age. Over half of respondents (55.64 %) had their first drink between the ages of 15-17. In fact, 83.46 percent of respondents had their first drink by age 17, all displaying underage drinking beginning at an age at least two years below the legal drinking limit in Nova Scotia, and the majority of Canada, with Quebec, Manitoba, and Alberta as exceptions.

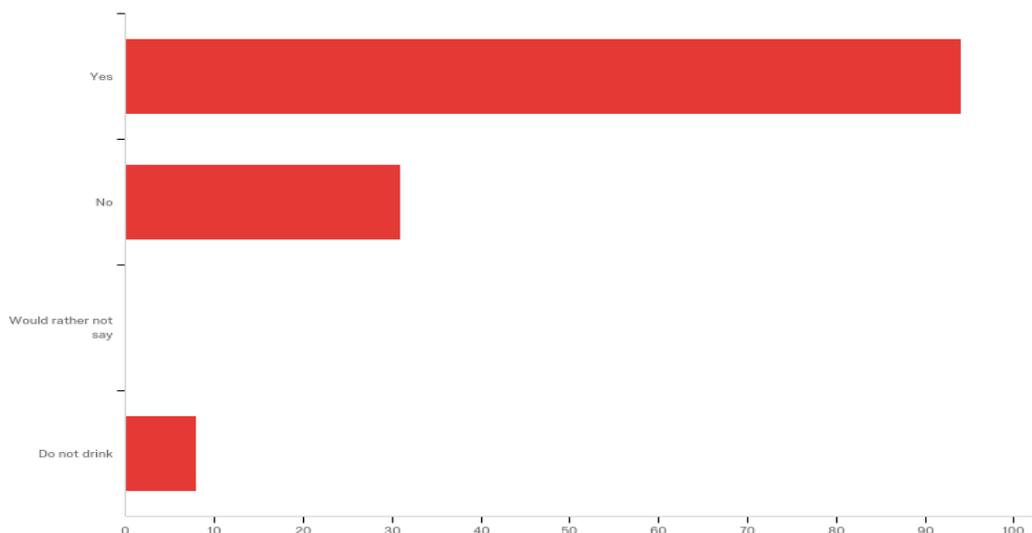
The most common response given for deciding to begin consuming alcohol was out of curiosity (79.70 %); perhaps this is why drinking begins at such a young age.

Q6 - Have you ever consumed alcohol?



The reason for why students began drinking is quite different from the reasons which they continue to drink. Nearly a third of respondents, 29.39 percent drink to get drunk about half of the time they decide to consume alcohol. A frightening finding from this questionnaire displays that 70.68 percent of students who have consumed alcohol at Saint Mary's University have experienced memory loss or blacking out as a result of drinking alcohol. Other interesting, yet slightly scary findings held that 55.64 percent of students have consumed alcohol before noon and 68.42 percent of students drank alcohol alone. In addition, 39.10 percent of students stated that they have felt guilty about drinking alcohol.

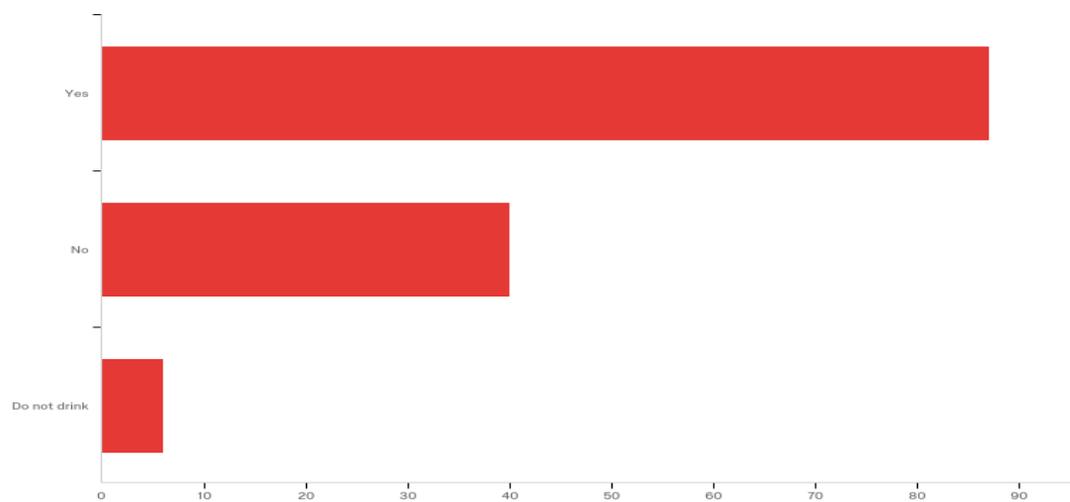
Q10 - Have you ever passed out or experienced memory loss as a result of drinking alcohol?



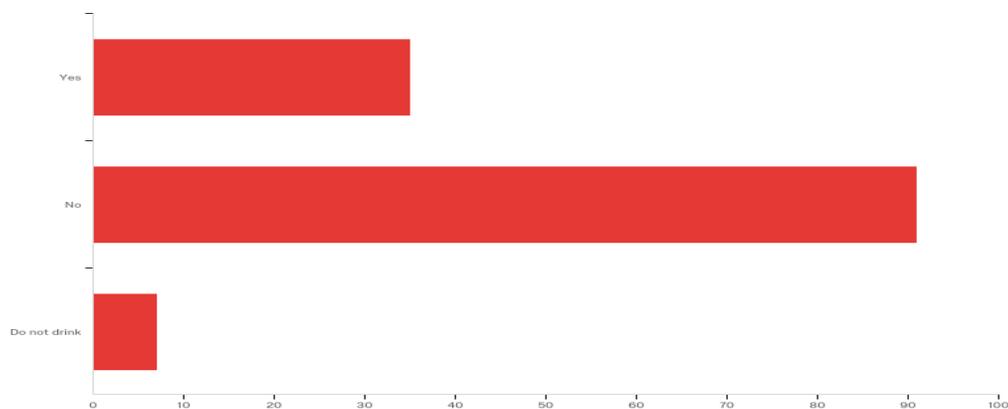
Nearly half (48.12 %) of participants have consumed alcohol to feel better about themselves, while 68.42 percent of students got drunk to feel more comfortable in social situations. A similar finding displayed that 66.41 percent of student participants have felt

more confident around a person they were attracted to once they've had a few alcoholic beverages. Additionally, a surprisingly low number of students, 26.31 percent have consumed alcohol to deal with academic pressures, while the majority, 68.42 percent have not felt the need to do so.

Q17 - Do you feel more confident around someone you're attracted to if you have a few alcoholic beverages?



Q18 - Do you or have you ever consumed alcohol to deal with academic pressures at school?



It is here that we can begin to see how students are using, or misusing, alcohol in relation to social and academic pressures. While the majority of students felt that alcohol helped their confidence in terms of social situations, they did not feel the need to use alcohol in such ways when facing academic pressures. In addition, the results displayed that students began consuming alcohol at young ages, with the majority of participants falling below the legal drinking age of Nova Scotia. The results of this questionnaire are quite clear; students at Saint Mary's University are drinking to socially fit in, not because of academic pressures. Each of these results will be examined in detail within the discussion section.

### **Discussion**

This study set out to find how Saint Mary's University students are coping with academic and social pressures, more particularly whether these academic and social pressures are dealt with by engaging in binge drinking as a result from feeling socially anxious. Findings from the questionnaire on *Assessing the Link Between Academic, Social Pressures, and Binge Drinking Among University Students* presented some interesting, frightening, and shocking findings to which the researchers were not expecting. There are certainly inferences to be made between some of the findings and the results that may speak volumes to the concerns of Saint Mary's University students and how they cope with their academic and social pressures. While the majority of people who participated in the online questionnaire were female (66.18%) and the dominant cultural ethnicity was comprised primarily of those who identified as white, the overall representation of the Saint Mary's Student body is well presented within this study as the

Saint Mary's campus is representative of less than 25 percent international students (Saint Mary's University, 2013).

At a first glance into the results of this study, it would appear as if students were not struggling academically or socially, due to the fact that the majority of participants were in third year and had decent grade point averages among the 3.0-4.0 range. Although, further analysis showed that despite high grade point averages, there is still cause for concern when the questionnaire revealed that 94.81 percent of students have consumed alcohol in their lifetime. It is, of course, normal for third year students to engage in casual consumption of alcohol beverages, but the problem arises when the results displayed that out of those students who identified as having an alcoholic beverage in their life, there were students who also identified as being 18 or younger. In Nova Scotia, as well as much of Canada, the legal drinking limit is 19. It is concerning that students are engaging in drinking practices prior to the legal drinking age, especially in a university setting as there are less authoritative restrictions. Many university students enter school with the mindset that their peers are engaging frequently in alcohol consumption, thus they increase their own consumption habits to fit in. This statement is reinforced by the finding at Yale University which holds that students enter university with exaggerated assumptions of who is drinking and how much they are drinking, where in reality many students choose to abstain from drinking (Tate, 2017).

As mentioned, the most common response given for deciding to begin consuming alcohol was out of curiosity. Perhaps the curiosity regarding alcohol is another reason as to why drinking begins at such a young age; however it does not answer why students continue to drink during their academic careers. Once students become aware of the

harmful effects of alcohol, many could assume that engagement in binge drinking would decrease, but this proves to be the opposite. Students are stressed while in school due to academic and social pressures, but perhaps the continuation of binge drinking is due to the rhetoric that university students are supposed to be having fun and engaging in party-like behaviour. Through media portrayals, it would appear that university is a place to party hard, to experiment with alcohol, drugs, and hook up cultures, and to have fun while engaging in these behaviours. With an increase in social media accessibility and an increase in apps, students are engrossed with their image and how it appears to their online friends and followers, thus resulting in the desire to fit in by whatever means necessary, such as binge drinking.

Over a quarter of the students who participated in this questionnaire, regardless of sex, are engaging in binge drinking as they are consuming alcoholic beverages at minimum once every two weeks and are consuming at least 5-6 alcoholic beverages per night of drinking. This finding, although slightly smaller, coincides with The National College Health assessment which found that out of 34,039 participants from Canadian universities there were 36 percent of students who indicated that they drank five or more drinks in one sitting at least once within the last 2 weeks. This questionnaire found that the reason for why students began drinking is quite different from the reasons which they continue to drink. Nearly a third of respondents drink to get drunk about half of the time they decide to consume alcohol, displaying that curiosity is no longer a factor and now students are using the side effects of alcohol to become intoxicated. This finding leads to further questions about why students are engaging in binge drinking when they already know what the side effects are, especially the negative ones. Another reason for continued

engagement in alcohol consumption is that it seems likely that students may enjoy some side effects of alcohol, such as feeling careless, silly, or with increased confidence, since they continue to engage in drinking. Despite enjoying some of the side effects of alcohol, there are still persistent risks associated with binge drinking, especially as a coping mechanism for academic or social pressures.

A frightening finding from this questionnaire showcases that 70.68 percent of students who have consumed alcohol at Saint Mary's University have experienced memory loss or blacking out as a result of drinking alcohol. This statistic is significantly greater than the one found in The National College Health Assessment, as their findings supported that 30 percent of students forgot where they were or what they did (blacking out and memory loss). Saint Mary's University students have reported significantly higher amounts of blacking out or memory loss than the average statistics from other Canadian universities as represented through The National College Health Assessment. Although there is no conclusive evidence as to why Saint Mary's students are enduring such negative side effects, an inference can be made into the Nova Scotian drinking culture. Nova Scotia, and the Atlantic Canadian provinces, are notoriously known for alcohol consumption, especially in the lower and working classes, which most Nova Scotians fall into. Additionally, Halifax has the most bars per capita in Canada, providing easy accessibility to go out for alcoholic drinks.

Saint Mary's students also engage in other risky behaviours in regards to drinking alcohol. For instance, well over half of Saint Mary's students have consumed alcohol before noon and over two thirds of students drank alcohol alone. These experiences with alcohol can potentially create or reinforce poor habits which in turn, may lead to seriously

harmful effects from alcohol consumption. As noted in the literature review of this essay, students engage in risky drinking, while still aware of the harmful effects which drinking has. This statement is amplified by the fact that 39.10 percent of students who participated in the questionnaire stated that they have felt guilty about drinking alcohol, perhaps due to the awareness of engaging in reckless and risky behaviour as a result of their alcohol consumption. Additionally, student's guilt may stem from the reasons in which they began to engage in drinking, especially if it was as a coping mechanism. As student stress is being reported more than ever, so too is binge drinking as a common response for such stress (Pederson, 2017). In a study conducted by Pederson (2017) she finds that when drinking is used as a coping mechanism, it becomes a patterned behaviour which is marked by the continuous increase of usage and application to a variety of other problems, even when it is not deemed to be situationally appropriate. If Saint Mary's students are engaging in such behaviours as these, they may feel increased stress, as opposed to stress reduction, because binge drinking actually has the ability to increase feelings stress and being overwhelmed (Pederson, 2017). The feelings of guilt after binge drinking are seemingly counter-productive measures to coping with social anxiety, stress, or pressures. Regardless of the counter-productive approaches to coping, students are appearing to fall into the dangerous cycle of binge drinking as a coping mechanism.

After digging deeper into the findings, it becomes apparent that Saint Mary's University students are engaging in such risky behaviours due to certain types of pressures, mainly social pressures. Nearly half of the participants admitted to consuming alcohol in order to feel better about themselves, while over two thirds of the students admitted to getting drunk to feel more comfortable in social situations. Student

participants also admit to feeling more confident around a person they were attracted to once they've had a few alcoholic beverages. This finding highlights the earlier noted study by Tavoracci (2016) which found that university students, especially female students, represent a stressed population who hold unhealthy and risky behaviours regarding nutrition, alcohol and the Internet, including social media or dating websites. Interestingly, as social media apps and websites are becoming increasingly used, students are becoming increasingly confident when consuming alcohol. Perhaps, this leads to unhealthy behaviour online and puts students at further risk for reckless behaviour as they are exposed to more social outlets aside from in person. Additionally, Tavoracci found that there are associations between playing university sports and binge drinking; yet another social pressure. This association contends that drinking is increased within sports teams because of socializing expectations amongst teammates and the inherent desire to fit in. It further emphasizes the social pressures to engage in drinking which university students face while on campus. Although this research did not particularly focus on the drinking behaviours of university sports teams, it did help to show that social bonding and social comfort are of great importance to those who engage in drinking.

In addition to this finding, it was earlier noted that Wells, Graham, & Purcell (2009) conducted a study on binge drinking prior to going out to a bar or social function. Wells and colleagues found that despite the associations of risk with binge drinking, there are three motivations which the authors contend are for heavy drinking prior to going out, one of which are to increase socializing with friends, reduce social anxiety and/or enhance group bonding before going out. These actions are displayed within this study as the majority of students noted that they felt more comfortable in social situations after

they have engaged in drinking alcohol. Furthermore, over half of respondents answered questions which alluded to them experiencing symptoms of social anxiety. Additionally, young heterosexual university men are noted to have used drinking as a way to engage in confidence building to prepare themselves for interactions with the opposite sex, as found within this study. Through Wells et al work, it would appear that much of the motivations for drinking heavily prior to attending a social function would be to alleviate social stress or social anxiety due to perceived or real social pressures. Wells and colleague's study reinforces the findings within this study as they display the need for alcohol confidence-boosting measures prior to engaging in social interactions with the opposite sex or to reduce social anxiety and social pressures amongst peers.

In the current study, a surprisingly low number of students have consumed alcohol to deal with academic pressures, while the majority, 68.42 percent have not felt the need to do so. This finding came as a surprise to the researchers as it was believed that students would use alcohol as a coping mechanism for academic pressures as they do for social pressures; however it appears that the majority of students who filled out the questionnaire had decently high grade point averages, so perhaps they did not feel strong academic pressures as their grades were not suffering. On the other hand, perhaps students did not engage in drinking as a coping mechanism to academic pressures because their concerns are far greater for social pressures while in university. Pederson's (2017) produced similar results. In Pederson's study, her findings suggested that binge drinking is more common among those who reported to have interpersonal conflicts such as relationships or living situations, inherently social situations and pressures. Pederson's study also highlighted that students who faced academic pressures were not as likely to

engage in binge drinking as a coping mechanism. Students may not engage in binge drinking to deal with academic pressures because they are concerned about grades, balancing their academic demands, and making decisions about future and they recognize that binge drinking may set them back in terms of their academic goals.

It is quite shocking that students engage in drinking more to alleviate social pressures than academic pressures, it creates an assumption that students are more concerned for their social appearances than academic appearances. Perhaps the increased concern for social appearances is due to the increased pressure of appearing as a well-rounded individual. University students are often faced with competitive situations in terms of grades, future employers, and social networking opportunities. This increased competitive nature perhaps leads students to care more about their social appearances than academic. Another potential reason for the increased concern about social appearances could be due to the increase of social media. Social media allows for people to put forward the best images of themselves, their thoughts on political or cultural occurrences, and essentially any aspect of their lives in which they wish to show. The increase in social media has also created a competitive nature among people, and arguably students. Social media has become a platform where individuals can portray a lifestyle which they want others to think they live; it has become a platform of self-esteem, or lack of. As social media has become a medium for determining social appearances, self-worth and changing modes of communication, alcohol becomes a factor to engage in such social behaviours and creating the imagery of living the university lifestyle, such as drinking and engaging in other reckless behaviours.

### **Limitations**

This study is the first of its kind to the researcher's knowledge that has been produced at Saint Mary's University. Although it reported some interesting and shocking findings, there are also limitations to be noted. First, the sample size of Saint Mary's university is a relatively small percentage of the total Saint Mary's University population. This acts as a limitation because it is not easily generalizable to the greater university population, although it does hold potential to act as an insight into some of the Saint Mary's university drinking culture. Another limitation to this study is the fact that the results are not comparable to other same-aged individuals; it can only be comparable to other university students as the academic and social pressures are only applicable to university students. Life pressures are likely completely different for young adults who are not in university, regardless of age. Finally, the time frame of the study acts as a limitation for several reasons. If the study had increased time for survey respondents, there would be a greater sample size resulting in a greater ability to be representative of Saint Mary's University. Additionally, a greater length of time would have allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the research findings.

### **Future research**

Given the fact that the findings supported a more social reason for engaging in drinking among university students, future research should focus more on social expectations for drinking and look into social media influences as much of student drinking behaviours and experiences are posted online. Using Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook as tools for identifying student drinking behaviours could perhaps shed light on how students are portraying themselves in an online social forum and how this relates to

binge drinking behaviours. Finally, future research should focus less on academic pressures and more on social pressures, while still maintaining a university setting for sample size because it may allow for more knowledge on the ways in which university culture can influence drinking as a coping mechanism for social anxiety. While focusing on these two suggestions for future research, findings may also suggest ways to intervene or prevent dangerous drinking behaviours as well as curbing or alleviating some of the social pressures which university students have reported.

### **Prevention and Intervention Strategies**

As displayed through a review of literature and findings of this study, binge drinking can have profound negative effects on many university students; however it is fortunate and integral that there are positive programs implemented on university campuses to address this risky phenomenon. For example, Boersma and Dell (2015) use three steps to identify substance abuse on the University of Saskatchewan campus and have incorporated these steps into a prevention and intervention program titled *What's Your Cap: Know When to Put a Lid on Drinking* (WYC). Their steps include; screening for at risk drinking, assessing the level of at risk drinking, and brief intervention or possible referral to substance abuse programs. These three steps are useful in identifying, limiting, or curbing binge drinking on campus as each step can be useful depending on which stage the student falls.

Using Terlecki et al (2011) work they examine an intervention program called *Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students* (BASICS). This intervention is said to reduce alcohol use and alcohol-related problems among undergraduates; however it is noted that variability in outcome exist within this initiative.

Their study attempts to identify individual difference variables related to the outcomes and how they could inform efforts to improve treatment protocols. Social Anxiety is examined in Terlecki et al's (2011) study due to the fact that one-third of university students meet the diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse during their university years in comparison to 6-13 percent of general population. The authors note that despite the efficacy of BASICS to reduce binge drinking and alcohol-related problems among university students there is much variability in the outcomes of the treatment program. Using this information, it is important to understand that treatments are not a 'one size fits all' solution; they must be informative, inclusive, and mixed-methods approaches to addressing social anxiety, academic or social pressures, and binge drinking on university campuses.

It is evident that treatment programs implemented on university or college campuses to lower the action of binge drinking, must incorporate a multi-layered approach which addresses individual differences and variability in responses to treatment. As noted, there can be multiple reasons for engaging in binge drinking and prevention or intervention programs must access and address each concern. Throughout the literature it is evident that social pressures, academic stressors, and social anxiety increase the risk of engaging in binge drinking. Understanding the motives for engaging in binge drinking as well as identifying healthier coping mechanisms for such pressures is important in maintaining student success and student health for short term and long term outcomes. Finally, creating a discourse surrounding that harmful effects of binge drinking, as well as the realities of who is and is not drinking would be influential in changing the ideologies of students who believe their peers are frequently engaging in such behaviours.

## Conclusion

University students are facing a new range of stressors, from financial stability to a comfortable work-life balance; there is no end to which students can feel pressures in their new academic setting. This study set out to understand the coping mechanisms for academic and social pressures in relation to feelings of social anxiety and binge drinking as the preferred coping mechanism. Using an online questionnaire, students alluded to engaging more in binge drinking when they felt social pressures as opposed to academic pressures. In fact, the majority of students did not use alcohol as a stress-reduction technique for academic pressures, perhaps due to the fear of jeopardizing their academic success or futures. This study was focused within a small Canadian university, in a province which is notoriously known for excessive drinking. The small sample size and inability to generalize to other age groups acted as limitations to this study; however this study also opened other avenues for future research to be conducted in the areas of social media, social influences, and binge drinking as a method of stress reduction. Overall, preventative or intervention strategies are important to incorporate into each university to limit or curb binge drinking as it is an unsafe and often, unhealthy practice. Once student pressures can be identified and limited, binge drinking may become less common in the university setting.

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## Appendix A- Recruitment Poster

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!** Help us investigate the effects of academic and social pressure among SMU undergraduate students

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### **RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY!!**

**Help us to understand the academic and social pressures that many students face when coming to university.** This study is being conducted by Kala Rafuse ([Kala.Rafuse@smu.ca](mailto:Kala.Rafuse@smu.ca)) and Dr. Rachael Collins ([r.collins@smu.ca](mailto:r.collins@smu.ca)) in the department of Sociology and Criminology

#### **WHO?**

Participants must be undergraduate students between the ages of 17-25 at Saint Mary's University

#### **WHY?**

Undergraduate students, especially first year students, are naturally in a new environment which present many new faces and opportunities. We are interested in understanding the connections between academic pressures, social pressure (self-esteem) and drinking among male and female undergraduate students at SMU. In total, this study will recruit approximately 200 participants!

#### **WHAT TO EXPECT:**

You will be asked to fill out an online questionnaire, including demographics (e.g., age, gender), which should take about 25 minutes

#### **COMPENSATION?**

To thank you for helping to advance our research. For your time, you will be automatically entered to win 1 of 4 -- \$50.00 cash prizes. The draw will take place on Thursday February 16<sup>th</sup> 2017 at noon!

#### **WHEN?**

Immediately!

#### **HOW?**

If you are interested in participating please log on to one of these links:

**REB # 17-107**

[http://qeasttrial.co1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_1YtcPp3TJrCGZW1](http://qeasttrial.co1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_1YtcPp3TJrCGZW1)



## Appendix B- Questionnaire

Assessing the link between academic and social pressures and binge drinking among university students

1. Please indicate your gender
2. What is your age?
3. What is your ethnic background?
4. What year are you currently enrolled in university?
5. What is your approximate GPA?
6. Have you ever consumed alcohol?
7. At approximately what age were you when you consumed your first alcoholic beverage?
8. Why did you begin consuming alcohol?
9. Do you ever drink to get drunk?
10. Have you ever passed out or experienced memory loss as a result of drinking alcohol?
11. Have you ever had a drink to feel good or better about yourself?
12. Have you ever been drunk in order to feel more comfortable in a social situation?
13. Do you or have you ever drank to escape pain, either physical or emotional?
  
14. Have you ever skipped or missed class because of drinking the night before?
15. Have you ever skipped or missed class because of drinking during the day?
16. Have you ever consumed alcohol in order to talk to the opposite sex?
17. Do you feel more confident around the opposite sex if you have few drinks?
18. Do you or have you ever consumed alcohol to deal with the academic pressures at school?
19. When you consume alcoholic beverages, how many do you typically consume over the span of a night?
20. How often do you consume alcoholic beverages?
21. Do you get anxious or worry if you make a fool of yourself, or feel you have been made to look foolish?
22. Are you easily hurt by what others say about you?
23. Do your peers influence the amount you drink alcohol?
24. Do you drink the most on the weekend?
25. Do you or have you ever had a drink before noon?
26. Do you or have you ever had a drink alone?
27. Are you able to relax and enjoy yourself around peers without alcohol?
28. Do you ever feel guilty about your drinking?

29. Do you often feel self-conscious by others?
30. Do you feel the need to drink in order to wind down from academic pressures?
31. Do you feel the need to drink in order to wind down from social pressures?
32. Have you ever received a lower grade because of drinking?

## **Appendix C- Codebook**

### **Assessing the link between academic, social pressures, and binge drinking among university students 2016-17**

#### **1. Gender:**

Male- 1  
Female- 2  
Other- 3

#### **2. Actual Age**

#### **3. Ethnicity**

White- 1  
Black- 2  
Aboriginal- 3  
Asian/Pacific Islander- 4  
Latino/Hispanic- 5  
Middle Eastern- 6  
Other- 7

#### **4. Year of study**

1<sup>st</sup>- 1  
2<sup>nd</sup>- 2  
3<sup>rd</sup>- 3  
4<sup>th</sup>- 4  
5<sup>th</sup>- 5

#### **5. Approximate GPA**

1.0-2.0- 1  
2.0-3.0- 2  
3.0-4.0- 3  
4.0-4.3- 4

#### **6. Ever consumed alcohol**

Yes- 1  
No- 2

#### **7. Age when first consumed alcoholic beverage?**

12-14- 1

15-17- 2

18-20- 3

20-22- 4

22-25- 5

Do not drink- 6

**8. Reason for first consuming alcohol**

peer pressure- 1

boredom- 2

wanted to see what it was like (curious)- 3

parental influence- 4

other – please explain- 5

do not drink- 6

**9. Do you ever drink to get drunk?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

Sometimes- 3

Do not drink- 4

**10. Have you ever passed out or experienced memory loss as a result of drinking alcohol?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

would rather not say- 3

Do not drink- 4

**11. Have you ever had a drink to feel good/better about yourself?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

Would rather not say- 3

do not drink- 4

**12. Have you ever been drunk in order to feel more comfortable in a social situation?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

Do not drink- 3

**13. Do you/have you ever drank to escape pain (physical or emotional)?**

Yes- 1  
No- 2  
would rather not say- 3  
Do not drink- 4

**14. Have you ever skipped or missed class because of drinking the night before?**

Yes- 1  
No- 2  
Do not drink- 3

**15. Skipped/missed class because of drinking during the day**

Yes- 1  
No- 2  
Do not drink- 3

**16. Consumed alcohol in order to talk to the opposite sex, or someone you find attractive**

Yes- 1  
No -2  
Do not drink- 3

**17. More confidence around someone you're attracted to if you have few drinks**

Yes- 1  
No- 2  
Do not drink- 3

**18. Do you/have you ever consumed alcohol to deal with the academic pressures at school?**

Yes- 1  
No- 2  
Do not drink- 3

**19. Alcoholic beverages typically consumed over the span of a night?**

1-2- 1  
3-4- 2  
5-6- 3  
7-8- 4  
Do not drink- 5

**20. How often do you consume alcoholic beverages?**

- Everyday- 1
- Twice a week- 2
- Three times a week- 3
- More than three times a week- 4
- I don't consume any alcohol- 5

**21. Anxious/worried if you make a fool of yourself, or feel you have been made to look foolish?**

- Yes- 1
- No- 2
- Sometimes- 3

**22. Are you easily hurt by what others say about you?**

- Yes- 1
- No- 2
- Sometimes- 3

**23. Do your peers influence the amount you drink alcohol?**

- Yes- 1
- No- 2
- Sometimes- 3
- Do not drink- 4

**24. Do you drink the most on the weekends?**

- Yes- 1
- No- 2
- Sometimes- 3
- Do not drink- 4

**25. Do you/have you ever had a drink before noon?**

- Yes- 1
- No- 2
- Do not drink- 3

**26. Do you or have you ever had a drink alone?**

- Yes- 1
- No- 2
- Do not drink- 3

**27. Are you able to relax and enjoy yourself around peers without alcohol?**

- Yes- 1

No- 2

Sometimes- 3

Do not drink- 4

**28. Do you ever feel guilty about your drinking?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

Do not drink- 3

**29. Do you often feel self-conscious by others?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

Sometimes-3

**30. Do you feel the need to drink in order to relax or calm down from academic pressures?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

Sometimes- 3

Do not drink- 4

**31. Do you feel the need to drink in order to relax or calm down from social pressures?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

Sometimes- 3

Do not drink- 4

**32. Have you ever received a lower grade because of drinking?**

Yes- 1

No- 2

Don't know- 3

Do not drink- 4

Appendix D- Table 1.0

Category	<i>N</i>
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>136 (100%)</b>
Male	42 (30.88%)
Female	90 (66.18)
Other	4 (2.94%)
<b>Total age range</b>	<b>136 (100%)</b>
18 or under	7 (5.15%)
19	12 (8.82%)
20	34 (25.00%)
21	44 (32.35%)
22	21 (15.44%)
23	5 (3.68%)
24	2 (1.47%)
25	2 (1.47%)
26+	9 (6.62)
<b>Total ethnicities</b>	<b>135 (99.26%)</b>
White	109 (80.74%)
Black	7 (5.19%)
Aboriginal	4 (2.96%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	3 (2.22%)
Latino/Hispanic	0 (0.00%)
Middle Eastern	5 (3.70%)
Other	7 (5.19%)
<b>Total Years Enrolled in University</b>	<b>135 (99.26%)</b>
First Year	13 (9.63%)
Second Year	21 (15.56%)
Third Year	55 (40.74%)
Fourth Year	35 (25.93%)
Fifth Year	11 (8.15%)
<b>Total Approximate GPA</b>	<b>135 (99.26%)</b>
1.0-2.0	3 (2.22%)
2.0-3.0	37 (27.41%)
3.0-4.0	73 (54.07%)
4.0-4.30	22 (16.30%)